



Research Paper: Comparison of Differentiation of Self, Couple Burnout, and Emotional Intimacy in Divorce-seeking and Normal Couples



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Abstract

Divorce is an undeniable fact of personal and social life and it happens when the life together is unbearable for the couple. The present study was conducted with the aim of comparing differentiation of self, couple burnout and emotional intimacy in divorce-seeking and normal couples. This research is of comparative causal type. The statistical population of the research included all couples applying for divorce who referred to four counseling centers (Ehya, Khanevade, Negahe No and Hamrah) in Rasht and non-applicant couples living in Rasht in spring and summer of 2022. The investigated sample includes 150 people (75 from divorce-seeking couples and 75 from non-seeking couples) who were selected by convenience sampling method, and were evaluated using the differentiation of self-inventory (DSI), couple burnout measurement (CBM) and personal assessment of intimacy in relationships (PAIR). The data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance and independent t-test. The results showed that there is a significant difference between the two groups of divorce applicants and non-divorce applicants in all aspects of differentiation of self, couple burnout and emotional intimacy ($P < 0.01$). Also, the results of the independent t-test showed that there is a significant difference in the total score of differentiation of self, couple burnout and emotional intimacy between the two groups ($P < 0.01$) and the mean of differentiation of self and emotional intimacy in the group of couples who did not file for divorce and the mean couple burnout was higher in applicant couples. The results of this research showed that the low level of couple burnout as well as having more differentiation of self and intimacy between couples can provide health and stability in their lives.

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1. Introduction

Self-differentiation can affect mental health, well-being, and life choices. It can raise the risk of death, reduce the quality of life, and trigger emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, grief, loneliness, and guilt (Auersperg et al., 2019). It can also change the life course and decisions of individuals (Konstam et al., 2016). Various economic, social, environmental and genetic factors and personal characteristics such as self-esteem, communication skills and marital intimacy influence the satisfaction and divorce of couples (Mokhles et al., 2021). Researchers think that they can predict divorce or deadlock by analyzing their communication patterns. If couples can deal with conflicts positively and effectively, having a lot of conflict does not necessarily damage their relationship. The link between conflict and marital satisfaction has a long research history (Pirmardvand Chegini & Karami, 2022). Recently, the scientific community has shifted its focus from the factors that cause divorce to the factors that lead to satisfied marriages. They can create a positive image that can help create and promote satisfied marriages in society by focusing on satisfied couples (Kheyrollahi et al., 2019).

One of the variables that relates to the level of marital satisfaction is self-differentiation (Bakhshizadeh et al., 2019). Self-differentiation, according to Bowen, is an ability to maintain contact with people while

“seff-erceivei””. In other words, self-differentiation means the ability to balance independence and interdependence in relationships (Peleg & Zoabi, 2014). Differentiated individuals can enjoy intimacy in close relationships without fearing losing their identity, while keeping their autonomy and calmness when faced with (Hill, 2008).

Another factor that has been found in couples who have difficulties is burnout (Zeng et al., 2020). Burnout in couples is a slow process where love and intimacy gradually diminish and cause overall exhaustion (Cecce & Józ, 2019). Burnout means the negative change of love and commitment in marriage, a process where love cools down and the wish to end the marriage and the relationship with the hurtful partner takes over the former love. Burnout involves the involuntary termination of emotional and romantic relationships. All marriages reach a point where love cools down and loses its depth. When a marriage faces problems, both partners suffer and often they are not aware of what went wrong (Clinton & Trent, 2009). Besides aspects such as intimacy and burnout that greatly influence the level of marital satisfaction in couples.

In addition, many researchers have reported that the human need for communication and closeness with others is natural and universal, and relationships that have intimacy are a major source of joy, sense of purpose and satisfaction in life. Considering that intimacy is a fundamental and higher need of humans, therefore, enhancing intimacy between partners is the

first step to create a desirable marriage (Bagarozzi, 2013). The meaning of intimacy in the available literature is not very clear. The word intimacy is often used to indicate the general feeling of partners from being close to each other (Yoo et al., 2013). Psychologists have defined intimacy as closeness, similarity and personal or emotional relationships with another person, which requires deep knowledge and understanding of the person and the expression of thoughts and feelings that show their resemblance with each other (Labrecque & Whisman, 2019).

The family center, which is the source of security, peace and intimacy for men and women, has been affected by negative processes in recent years and this endangers the social health because the family problems disturb the family system and if the problems get worse, the family will fall apart. The breakdown of the family not only harms the psychological-emotional well-being of the family members and the society, but also causes many social damages (Gravningen et al., 2017). Therefore, by comparing the divorce seekers and those who have not harmed their joint life, one can find out the factors that cause this problem and use this knowledge to increase the awareness of families and make the counseling process easier for divorce seekers, in order to avoid divorce. In addition, by finding out the influencing factors, one can use them in planning suitable treatment programs to fix the damaged relationships, especially for the couples who are in danger. The outcomes of such studies can be useful for the organizations that deal with social damages,

such as the Welfare Organization, family courts and counseling and psychotherapy centers, or any institution that tries to help couples and families. Therefore, this research tries to answer this question: Is there a difference between self-differentiation, marital alienation and emotional intimacy in divorce seekers and normal couples?

2. Method

This research uses a causal-comparative study, which also has the names of a cross-sectional and post-hoc research method. The predictor variable is not under the direct control of the researcher in this method because it has happened in different situations and the researcher only assesses its kind and degree of influence on the criterion variable at the current time. Two groups of divorce seekers and non-seekers who resided in Rasht city in the first half of 1401 and attended the counseling centers of Rasht city to deal with their marital issues make up the research population. The research sample includes 150 individuals (75 individuals from divorce seekers and 75 individuals from normal couples). The convenience sampling method chose the divorce seekers group from the individuals who were in the counseling centers of Rasht city and the purposive sampling method chose the normal couples group in proportion to the circumstances of the seekers group from among the couples who lived in Rasht city. The entry criterion for normal couples was that they had do not have intense marital disputes, no desertion and readiness to participate in the research.

2.1. Instrument

The Differentiation of Self-Inventory (DSI): Skowron and Friedlander developed this questionnaire in 1998 with 43 items. It was updated in 2003 and consisted of 46 items and 4 factors (Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, emotional cut off and fusion with others) and is applied to assess the level of differentiation of individuals. It mainly concentrates on important relationships in life and current interactions with their original family (Skowron & Smith, 2003). Skowron and Friedlander (1998) reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this questionnaire as 0.88. The reliability coefficient of the entire test was also 0.92 in the research (Skowron & Smith, 2003). Yoonesi (2006) normalized this test on a normal sample in Iran and its validity was confirmed by the entire scale 0.85, emotional reaction 0.77, I position 0.60, emotional cutoff 0.65 and fusion with others 0.70.

Couple Burnout Measurement (CBM): Pines (1993) developed this scale with 21 items on a Likert spectrum. Kaiser (1993) constructed the items of this scale using the Love Scale of Rubin (1973, cited by Kayser, 1993) and the "Peapack Performance (PAIR)" by Schaefer and Olson (1981, cited by Kayser, 1993) as well as his own clinical experiences. This scale has 11 items that measure positive emotions (care, attachment, etc.) and 10 items that measure emotions that show dissatisfaction (McCarthy, 2006). The scores of the scale had a high positive correlation with the scores of other alienation scales and a negative correlation with the scales that

measure marital intimacy and closeness in the sample of Pines (1993), add Cronbach's alpha was 0.97. Sadati et al. (2021) also obtained the reliability of the scale by Cronbach's alpha method as 0.79 in a research with a sample of 300 teachers in Iran.

The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR): This questionnaire was created by Shofer and Olson (1981) and assesses intimacy in six aspects of emotional, social, sexual, rational, recreational and customary. With this questionnaire, individuals explain their communicative intimacy based on what they are presently feeling in their relationship (perceived intimacy) and also what they hope for from the relationship (expected intimacy). This questionnaire is a 36-item self-report instrument that uses a 5-point Likert scale for grading the items. The lowest and highest scores of a person in the entire scale are 36 and 180, respectively; and in each of the subscales, they are 6 and 30. In this questionnaire, a higher score shows more intimacy. Shofer & Olson (1981) measured the reliability of the subscales of the questionnaire by Cronbach's alpha between 0.70 and 0.77, which was 0.75 for the emotional intimacy subscale, 0.77 for the sexual intimacy subscale, 0.70 for the rational intimacy subscale, 0.70 for the recreational intimacy subscale and 0.71 for the social intimacy subscale. Shirali Nia (2012) also computed the reliability of intimacy subscales which was 0.62 for the emotional intimacy subscale, 0.70 for the sexual intimacy subscale, 0.64 for the rational intimacy

subscale, 0.70 for the recreational intimacy subscale and 0.60 for the social intimacy subscale, which indicated the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire.

2.2. Procedure

We obtained permission from the welfare and visited four counseling centers (revival, family, new look and companion) in Rasht city. We examined the list of couples who had registered for divorce through the judicial decision system and had been referred to these counseling centers. Then we selected 150 people (75 couples applying for divorce by the method of sampling available and 75 couples of the group of ordinary people by the method of purposive sampling and among the couples living in Rasht city). We explained the method of filling out the questionnaires for the sample and asked them to answer the research questionnaires. We entered the research data into the statistical software for analysis. We used descriptive statistical methods of mean and standard deviation and frequency and percentage to examine the descriptive and demographic information of the subjects. We used inferential statistical methods (multivariate analysis of variance and independent t-test) to test the research hypotheses. We performed all data analysis using SPSS software version 20.

3. Results

The results revealed that the people who applied for divorce had an average age of

Table 1

37.24 years with a standard deviation of 4.34, while the people who did not apply for divorce had an average age of 40.57 years with a standard deviation of 4.84. The results also revealed that the people who applied for divorce had been married for an average of 8.86 years with a standard deviation of 2.55, whereas the people who did not apply for divorce had been married for an average of 9.82 years with a standard deviation of 1.72. The gender analysis in both groups indicated that women made up 53.3% of the people who applied for divorce and 50.7% of the people who did not apply for divorce, while men made up the rest. The education level analysis indicated that 36% of the people who applied for divorce and did not apply for divorce had an associate degree, and the rest had a diploma. The employment status showed that 54.7% of the people who applied for divorce and 49.3% of the people who did not apply for divorce were employed and the rest were unemployed. The results showed the number of children for each group. The people who applied for divorce had different numbers of children than the people who did not apply for divorce. 16% of the people who applied for divorce had no children. 28% of the people who did not apply for divorce had no children. 62.7% of the people who applied for divorce had one child. 45.3% of the people who did not apply for divorce had one child. The rest of the participants in both groups had two children.

Mean and standard deviation of total score and dimensions of self-differentiation, alienation and emotional intimacy by two groups

Component	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
Emotional Reactivity	Divorce Applicant	25.09	1.67
	Non-Applicant	32.42	3.21
My Position	Divorce Applicant	25.18	2.50
	Non-Applicant	37.08	5.69
Emotional Fusion	Divorce Applicant	32.70	2.64
	Non-Applicant	42.81	4.51
Fusion	Divorce Applicant	39.70	3.06
	Non-Applicant	49.28	4.95
Differentiation	Divorce Applicant	122.69	4.57
	Non-Applicant	161.60	15.83
Marital Burnout	Divorce Applicant	59.13	5.13
	Non-Applicant	34.14	9.84
Emotional intimacy	Divorce Applicant	18.80	3.57
	Non-Applicant	30.47	4.90

The researcher used an independent t-test to compare the two groups of divorce applicants and non-applicants on their total

score of self-differentiation, marital burnout and emotional intimacy. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis.

Table 2
Comparison of marital burnout and emotional intimacy total scores in the two groups using independent t-test

Component		T	df	Sig
Differentiation	Assuming equal variances	-20.44	148	0.001
	Assuming unequal variances		86.26	0.001
Marital Burnout	Assuming equal variances	19.49	148	0.001
	Assuming unequal variances		111.47	0.001
Emotional Intimacy	Assuming equal variances	-16.60	147	0.001
	Assuming unequal variances		133.4	0.001

The researcher compared the total score of self-differentiation between the two groups using an independent t-test. The test results showed a significant difference and the mean comparison indicated that the non-applicants group had a higher mean of this variable. The researcher also compared the total score of

marital burnout between the two groups using an independent t-test. The test results showed a significant difference and the mean comparison indicated that the applicants group had more burnout than the non-applicants group.

The researcher also compared the total score of emotional intimacy between the two groups using an independent t-test. The test results showed a significant difference and the mean comparison indicated that the applicants group had less emotional intimacy than the non-applicants group. The researcher then used a multivariate analysis of variance to compare the dimensions of self-differentiation in the two groups of applicants and non-applicants. The researcher examined the assumptions of this test... that the homogeneity of covariance assumption was not met ($P = 0.001$, M Box = ...).

test results showed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was not met for any of the dimensions of self-differentiation ($P > 0.05$). However, since the sample size of the two groups was equal, there was no limitation for performing the analysis of variance test. There was a significant difference between the dimensions under study in the two groups of applicants and non-applicants ($P = 0.001$, $F = 55555$). Table 3 shows the results of the multivariate analysis of variance for comparing the dimensions of self-differentiation in the two groups under study.

Table 3

Comparison of the dimensions under study using multivariate analysis of variance in the two groups

Component	SS	df	MS	F	Sig	η^2
Reactivity	2016.66	1	2016.66	306.21	0.001	0.674
My situation	5304.42	1	5304.42	274.40	0.001	0.650
Emotional rift	3830.42	1	3830.42	279.40	0.001	0.654
Hybridity (mixture)	3436.82	1	3436.82	202.43	0.001	0.578

According to the multivariate analysis of variance, divorce applicants and non-applicants differed significantly in all aspects of differentiation.

4. Discussion

This study compared how divorce applicants and normal couples differ in self-differentiation, marital alienation and emotional intimacy. The two groups showed significant differences in all aspects of differentiation, which agreed with previous studies (Peleg & Zoabi, 2014; Hill, 2008). Bowen (1978) argued that low differentiation leads to individual, family and system

problems. This supports the idea that high differentiation allows people to enjoy emotional intimacy in relationships without giving up their true selves (Peleg, 2008). Couples with low differentiation have less emotional maturity and capacity for intimacy and unity when they marry and they give up their growth and self-leadership for their relationship stability. They become anxious and dysfunctional when they face stress. They also react more emotionally to their problems. They are mixed up with each other when they want to get closer (Sadati et al., 2013). Moreover, the study found a significant

difference in marital alienation between the two groups, which matched the findings of previous studies. (ppp ceccc & Jzz,,, 2020; Clinton & Trent, 2009).

The results showed a significant difference in marital burnout between the applicants and non-applicants for divorce. This was in line with previous studies (cccc eccc & Jzz,,, 0000; Clinton & Trent, 2009). The results can be explained by the four-stage cycle of divorce, which consists of decision-making, planning, separation, and adaptation to divorce (Clinton & Trent, 2009). All these stages can indicate marital burnout, which is the loss of emotional attachment to the spouse. It involves lack of attention, emotional indifference, and increased loneliness and dissatisfaction. The main feeling in this stage is frustration, which comes from the negative and harmful behaviors of the wife and husband. The couples find it hard to ignore the mistakes of the spouse, which was easy in the first stage. They also become distant from each other and consider divorce, separation, or finding a better partner, which raises the chance of marital burnout (Peleg, 2008). Frustration is different from hopelessness and burnout, anger and frustration, which are more prominent in this stage. They are caused by the negative and harmful behaviors of the wife and husband. Unlike the previous stage, anger and frustration decrease somewhat and emotional coldness increases a lot. The couples do not engage in conciliatory behaviors that could offend the spouse (Hill, 2008). The psychological pressures that weaken love, the gradual increase of fatigue and monotony, and the

accumulation of small pains facilitate the separation of the couples.

The results also showed a significant difference in emotional intimacy between the applicants and non-applicants for divorce. This was consistent with previous studies (Bagarozzi, 2013; Yoo et al., 2013; Whisman & Labrecque, 2019). The results can be explained by the importance of emotional intimacy for adult relationships, as most social psychologists suggest. Emotional intimacy is the connection point between couples and strengthens their relationship. If it is damaged, their marital life will also be at risk of damage and separation. In some marital relationships, the unwritten system and rules of the couples may limit the expression of emotions. As a result, the couples cannot express some of their emotions with passion and enthusiasm (Bagarozzi, 2013). Therefore, the problems that arise in expressing and expressing emotional intimacy increase the distance between the couples and the probability of separation and divorce. Moreover, the results of various studies have shown that intimacy between couples is one of the basic components in the stability and strength of a marital life. Any factor that weakens it is a destructive factor in marital satisfaction and compatibility, and can increase the likelihood of reduced marital satisfaction and divorce.

5. Conclusion

We can state that couples can protect their lives by having a high level of self-differentiation and emotional intimacy. If either spouse lacks differentiation or emotional intimacy, they may become

dissatisfied and separated. Undifferentiated individuals (less differentiated) have more conflicts that are emotional in marital issues because they are emotionally involved in them. They also have less power to deal with problems logically, so they get into marital conflicts. On the other hand, highly differentiated people can enjoy emotional intimacy in relationships without sacrificing their true selves. This reduces marital dissatisfaction and increases intimacy. Therefore, when couples have lower differentiation in marital relationships, they fuse more, which creates and exacerbates marital conflicts. The results of this study showed that divorce applicants had lower differentiation and emotional intimacy and more marital dissatisfaction. Therefore, couple therapists and family counselors should pay special attention to these three influential variables in their couple therapy sessions.

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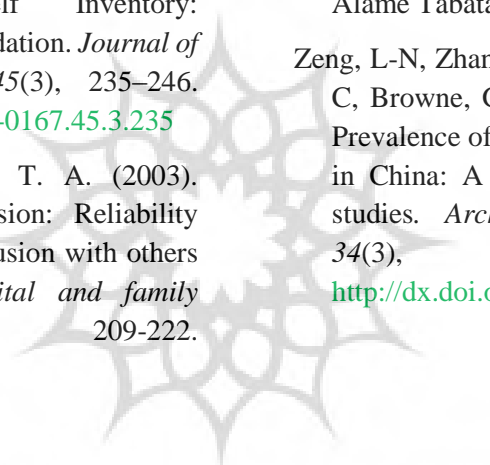
Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any organization. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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